



# CONDUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

This resource provides a workflow for conducting an oral history interview. Having a structure to follow ensures that the interview is conducted in a professional and respectful manner, and that all relevant information is collected. This workflow is a framework for conducting an effective interview, and the bulk of the questions asked will vary between projects and interviewees.

For more information about oral histories, view related items connected to this resource on the Sustainable Heritage Network in the “[Audio Recordings](#)” category.

- Basic Oral History Recording Kit: Equipment Purchasing Guide
- Oral History Interview Planning and Recording: Workflow
- Suggested Guidelines for Recorded Interviews

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW: NOTES AND PREPARATION

Make sure to prepare for the interview with these steps:

- Research your topic. The type and depth of research will vary by topic, but may include scholarly research (eg: for historical or high profile events), research in local newspapers, magazines, or other publications (eg: for local history), and preliminary conversations or interviews with other individuals (eg: for minimally documented events or organizations).
- Find out basic details about your interviewee.
- Prepare a list of questions or topics that will guide the interview.
- Prepare a release form, deed of gift, or other formal agreement to obtain permission to record, save, and share their oral history recording. This is typically signed and completed at the end of the interview.
- Test your equipment.

Things to keep in mind:

- Never record secretly. Use a release form for the participants, get verbal permission, and inform people when you start and stop the recording.
- Be yourself. Don't pretend to know more about someone or something than you do know. Regardless of the amount of research you have done, your interviewee should be treated as an expert on the topics discussed.
- Never ask questions you don't understand.
- Pay attention to the comfort (both physical and emotional) of your interviewee. Long interviews can be taxing.
- Avoid leading questions or questions that already suggest an answer.
- Try to keep your opinions out of the interview.
- Don't begin the interview with questions about controversial topics.
- Don't interrupt the interviewee as they respond, as it may disrupt their thought process. If needed, try to redirect with follow-up questions.
- During the interview, encourage the interviewee by paying attention. Avoid looking at your list of questions or topics or adjusting the equipment, unless absolutely necessary. Careful, engaged listening is critical to the interview process.
- Keep your questions short and avoid complex multi-part questions. Make use of follow-up questions instead.

## SEGMENT 1: FOR THE RECORD AND OPENING STATEMENT

The following information should be recorded on the recording as well as on any accompanying paperwork. It can be spoken by either the interviewer or interviewee as desired. At a minimum, a brief opening statement should include:

- The date and location of the interview.
- The name of the person being interviewed.
- The name of the interviewer and their institutional affiliation or relationship to the interviewee.
- The name of the camera or audio recording operator, if different from the interviewer.
- The name of anyone else present for the interview, even if they are not planning to participate.

## SEGMENT 2: JOGGING MEMORY, DATA CONFIRMATION, BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Next, confirm or collect some basic facts about the interviewee and topic, to ease the interviewee into the conversation. While closed-ended, yes/no, or very brief questions should generally be avoided, they are good to include here as warm up questions and fact confirmation. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- When were you born? (complete date)
- Where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- What are the names of your parents and siblings?
- Other questions that may lead into your main topics of interest:
  - When/where did you meet \_\_\_\_\_?
  - When/where did \_\_\_\_\_ happen?
  - How did you get interested in \_\_\_\_\_?

## SEGMENT 3: EXPERIENCES

This will comprise the bulk of your interview. You should have questions, topics, and prompts prepared to guide your interviewee and elicit responses.

- Do not try to rigidly adhere to your questions - if your interviewee covers them in a different order, or branches into different topics, let them do so.
- Avoid questions that can be answered with a “yes” or a “no”. You are not just after the facts that can be asked via a questionnaire – you want *stories*, *narratives*, and *explanations*.
- Make use of follow-up or probing questions to elicit more detailed information:
  - When did \_\_\_\_\_ happen?
  - Did \_\_\_\_\_ happen to you?
  - What are the steps in doing \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Can you give me an example of \_\_\_\_\_?
- If discussing a physical object or event, briefly describe it in conversation with follow-up questions:
  - This is a photo of you and your family?
  - This is a carved, painted wooden duck, it’s about the size of a football.
  - [In response to hand gestures] The fish you caught, looks like it was about 30cm long?

## SEGMENT 4: WRAP UP AND CLOSING STATEMENT

Finally, provide a space for the interviewee to share any final thoughts, thank your interviewee on record, and close the recording. Depending on the nature of the interview questions, this may be an opportunity to invite the interviewee to reflect on their broader life and community, ideally with questions based on the topics they were most passionate about during the interview.

- Ask the interviewee, “Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?”
- Thank the interviewee for their time and the interview

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Oral history interviews require a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. It is important to make yourself available for any follow up the interviewee may have later.

- Be sure that all parties sign the appropriate release forms (this is often done at the end of an interview). See the American Folklife Center’s resources for release forms linked in the Additional Resources below.
- Discuss scheduling any follow up interviews if needed.
- If appropriate, photographically document any prompts that were used (eg: photos, objects).
- Discuss how you will provide copies of the recording and any other materials to the interviewee.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- American Folklife Center - Oral History Interviews
  - <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/familyfolklife/oralhistory.html>